

Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing for Survivors of Domestic Violence

Communities are increasingly using homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing to meet the needs of domestic violence survivors.

In a single day in the United States, more than 37,000 survivors of domestic violence and their children rely on a domestic violence shelter or transitional housing program to meet their needs for safety and shelter. While emergency housing remains an essential element of an adequate domestic violence response, some survivors can avoid homelessness and shelter stays with assistance to stay in their existing housing or find new housing.

Federal resources are helping local communities offer this assistance to survivors. The Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) and the new Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) enacted under the HEARTH Act provide communities with significant new resources to prevent homelessness and re-house those who do lose their housing. Additionally, the Office of Violence Against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice administers transitional housing grants that provide flexible rental assistance and case management services.

Using these tools, providers are helping survivors avoid homelessness altogether or quickly re-establish housing in the community to minimize their experience of homelessness. This allows providers to keep emergency shelter available for women and children who need immediate safety and the confidential location a domestic violence shelter provides. Additionally, these strategies minimize the additional stress, displacement, and trauma that accompany homeless episodes for women and children healing from domestic violence.

Homelessness Prevention Strategies for Domestic Violence Survivors

The intersection of homelessness and domestic violence is complex. Many women leave their housing and seek shelter to escape a dangerous partner. Others are evicted from housing due to a batterer's destructive or criminal behavior, such as damaging property, harassing landlords, failing to pay rent, causing disturbances, and perpetrating physical or sexual assaults in the unit. In some cases, once the batterer is removed by means of eviction or public safety efforts, the remaining tenants must also leave because the unit is no longer affordable. Similarly, a survivor may be unable to pay rent because of actions taken by an abusive partner to undermine her economic stability and ability to live independently. Examples include sabotaging her employment opportunities or attempts to access welfare assistance, failing to pay child support, and damaging her credit. In many cases, however, the survivor's first choice for herself - and especially for her children - would be to stay in her own home.

The main purpose of homelessness prevention activities is to avoid entirely a disruptive and costly homelessness episode for households. Homelessness prevention can include:

- financial assistance to pay back rent or utilities,
- short-term rental assistance until families can resume paying rent independently,
- case management and legal assistance to help a household remain in its current housing, and
- assistance to obtain new housing without entering a shelter.

Helping survivors maintain their housing or quickly find new housing decreases their burden of economic hardship, housing instability, and uncertain futures as they work toward establishing safety for them and their children. Increasing capacity to support survivors through prevention assistance aligns with the aim of the domestic violence movement to broaden survivors' options, create alternatives to remaining in abusive homes, and reduce the degree to which survivors are re-victimized in the aftermath of abuse. Many domestic violence programs are embracing this commitment and enacting programmatic innovations that address survivors' housing needs. Some provide help with housing costs, advocate for survivors around tenant rights, and intervene with landlords to redress barriers to housing based on domestic violence-related evictions and debt.

Help with Housing Costs

Some domestic violence providers offer financial assistance to help women retain their own housing if they may stay there safely, or to secure new housing. These programs offer short-term rental assistance to help survivors maintain their housing while they work to establish an income to afford housing independently. Additional assistance may be offered to help secure employment or benefits, and to help survivors address legal, medical, and trauma-related issues that are often part of healing, resolution of which can be critical to establishing income and stability.

To prevent homelessness among domestic violence survivors, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates Foundation) is funding four programs in the state of Washington to help with housing. The four programs have the flexibility to pay for rental assistance, advocacy, and other supports that promote stability and rapid re-housing. Providers report that the flexible resources allow them to tailor interventions to meet survivors' unique needs which ultimately results in improved outcomes, housing stability and efficient use of resources. Based on the success of the initiative, agencies are enhancing their ability to meet the housing needs of survivors through crafting new relationships with landlords, housing authorities, and homeless and housing service providers. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence is providing technical assistance to the four sites, evaluating outcomes, and educating the broader community about the importance of permanent housing options for survivors of violence. This important investment will result in lessons that can be translated to providers nationally and improve the response to survivors of violence.

Protecting Tenants' Rights and Direct Advocacy with Landlords

Programs are working to educate survivors and housing providers about the legal protections of survivors. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) prohibits discrimination against women who are survivors of domestic violence in publicly assisted housing and makes it easier for women to break a lease in public housing and move to a new unit when necessary for safety. This allows survivors to retain the benefits of assisted housing without having to remain in the unit in which they are no longer safe. Domestic violence advocates have also achieved hard won legal protections in many states that make it easier for survivors to access and retain housing in the private rental housing market. Maryland and Illinois, for example, allow survivors to break leases with private landlords and change locks in rental units to address security concerns and prevent re-assault.

Survivors, their private and public landlords, and public housing agencies are frequently unaware of the legal protections afforded them under VAWA, the Fair Housing Act, or state and local legislation to protect survivors. When landlords and domestic violence providers work together, the result is a “win-win” outcome for survivors and landlords. In addition to ensuring survivors’ legal protections are adhered to, providers advocate directly with landlords to help preserve survivors’ housing. Advocacy may include educating landlords about a survivor’s legal protections and possible safety concerns while also working to address landlord’s concerns. In many instances, a landlord may be willing to increase the physical safety of rental units, make payment arrangements that allow a survivor to pay rent arrears over time, or file a no trespassing court order for the entire property against the abusive ex-partner to offer greater security and maintain a survivors’ tenancy.

Helping to preserve survivors’ housing avoids costly evictions, lost rent revenue, and very often the loss of a good tenant. Landlords also find that developing partnerships with domestic violence providers can help them be more responsive to other tenants who may be impacted by domestic violence. Many landlords appreciate the opportunity to make a positive difference in their community. Recognition of their contributions on behalf of survivors and upgrades to property to improve security can also pay dividends in improving the reputation and attractiveness of their rental housing.

The District Alliance for Safe Housing (DASH) in Washington, DC is an example of a program committed to preventing homelessness for domestic violence survivors. DASH regularly holds forums for landlords and provides education and advocacy assistance to women impacted by violence. Trainings have helped the organization establish working relationships with many landlords on whom they rely to help re-house survivors in their domestic violence program. In turn, landlords with many units of housing now turn to their new domestic violence partners for help when they suspect their tenants may be victims of violence.

Essentials of Rapid Re-Housing for Survivors

Many women turn to emergency or transitional housing programs to seek immediate safety from a batterer. These women can face difficulties when they are ready to re-establish independent households. Like all women with limited economic resources, they face enormous challenges finding safe, adequate, and affordable housing. Additionally, due to interference from an abuser, survivors of domestic violence may lack favorable credit, work histories, or references, when they apply for new housing. As a result, women may spend protracted periods of time in shelters and transitional housing programs while they seek new employment, save money for a security deposit and first month's rent, and search for new housing. These prolonged stays in shelter or temporary housing can be costly for survivors. Their dependence on programs to meet their housing needs restricts their choices and can forestall their progress in re-establishing independent lives. It also ties up emergency housing resources that may be critically needed by other women fleeing violence.

Rapid re-housing is a strategy designed to help people overcome challenges in re-establishing independent households. Rapid re-housing helps women reconnect to housing quickly by offering housing search assistance and landlord advocacy, and rental assistance. More specialized services are also offered by domestic violence providers that are designed to specifically help survivors recover from the impact of violence in their lives. Programs that have adopted a rapid re-housing approach have demonstrated that the families assisted remain stably housed. One study found that 85 percent of families remained stably housed 18 months after a housing placement.

Targeting Rapid Re-housing: Deciding Who to Serve

One of the primary questions providers face when developing a rapid re-housing strategy for survivors is who to serve and when. A survivor's immediate safety, emotional, and physical needs must be the first issue addressed. A woman in crisis may be unready to focus on developing a permanent housing plan for herself and her family. Delivery of rapid re-housing services does not usually occur until after the immediate crisis has been somewhat resolved.

Since most rapid re-housing programs do not offer permanent rent subsidies, families targeted for rapid re-housing assistance must be prepared to pay rent independently after a period of time. This reality influences all other aspects of the program model, including who is targeted for the program, the kind of housing that is sought, and strategies employed that can help women increase their incomes.

Providing Housing Search Assistance

Vigorous and proactive landlord outreach and housing search assistance are critical to the success of rapid re-housing programs. Providers use a variety of strategies to educate landlords in the community about the services available and the myths surrounding domestic violence survivors. Providers report that offering information about the impact and dynamics of domestic violence and building transparent, trusting relationships are

effective strategies that increase landlords' willingness to offer reduced rent and to waive credit history checks. One particular strategy used by providers is to have a landlord guarantee fund, which will pay for repairs if a unit is damaged. Landlords can be important allies in promoting the security of rental units and thus the safety of the families housed there. Landlords discover that a partnership with a domestic violence provider can help them better serve their existing tenants as well.

In working with an individual survivor, housing search assistance begins with an assessment of the individual's strengths, resources and supports, goals, and barriers to housing. Understanding the reasons behind previous evictions or utility arrearages can prepare the housing advocate to address those challenges. As with all prospective tenants, housing choice involves a complex array of options influenced by cost, proximity to public transportation, the survivor's employment, access to good schools, and the desirability of the rental unit. Housing advocates who work with domestic violence survivors attend closely to the security features of available units and the surrounding area. Features that may be assessed and discussed with the survivor include how well lit the entry way to the rental unit is, security features in windows and doors, and the proximity and responsiveness of police in the area. Housing advocates may ask landlords to upgrade units that lack important security features or may even provide funds toward those upgrades. Developing and maintaining a safety plan for survivors in the new housing is of paramount importance.

Provide Rental Assistance

Rapid re-housing programs typically offer some amount of financial assistance to help survivors pay for housing. Programs vary as to how long and how deeply they subsidize rents. Since the amount of money they have available to pay for rent is typically fixed, the more rental assistance they give to each family the fewer families they can help. Programs work to find a balance between serving a few families with "long-term" rent assistance (typically 18 months or longer), or more families with "short term" assistance (a few months of rent, or simply deposits). Similarly, they must decide whether to provide "deep subsidy" (100% of rent), "shallow subsidy" (typically less than 70% of rent), "flat subsidy" (a small amount every month) or require tenants to pay a percentage of their income for rent (typically 30%). Some programs also use a "step-down" approach, decreasing rental assistance over time, allowing survivors time to assume the full financial responsibility. The decision about how to allocate rental assistance is an important one as it determines both how many families can be served, and how successful the families will be.

To decide how to allocate rental assistance, programs take into account the local economy and how difficult it will be for survivors to find employment that will allow them to maintain housing independently. Domestic violence providers who designed rental assistance subsidies prior to the onset of the recession found that the ability to modify the rental assistance offered to women was critical to their success. Clackamas Women's Services, a domestic violence provider in Oregon City, OR, received a substantial portion of their community's HPRP funds. They developed a formula for

determining the amount of rental assistance a family would receive based on a number of factors, including the fair market rent in the community, the income of the household, and the average maximum the community was willing to provide with HPRP funds. Over time, with the recognition of how difficult it had become to find jobs in the area, the program changed its approach. It now works with each household individually to determine how to best structure the rental assistance.

Domestic violence providers that offer rent assistance programs are also sensitive to women's histories of economic exploitation. Previous partners may have used money to control women, and domestic violence providers must avoid recreating those patterns. Programs might offer a pre-set amount of rental assistance for each household and work with the women to determine the best way to allocate assistance over a period of time. Alternatively, programs may have a clear set of criteria for accessing rental assistance and determining the circumstances under which extensions are granted. Whatever the actual policies, programs should ensure they are clear to all parties involved. This helps build strong relationships between program participants and staff, and increases survivors' power and choices in their own lives.

Delivering Mobile, Voluntary Advocacy and Support Services

As with rental assistance, the supportive services provided to households can vary widely. Programs may provide services themselves, or they may link survivors to community-based services.

Rapid re-housing providers find that providing housing-focused support and advocacy is a critical element in creating a smooth transition into housing and promoting housing retention. Housing-focused support includes assistance in housing search, landlord negotiation, and activities that help survivors retain housing. Providers may offer landlord mediation and tenant rights trainings, budgeting support, and help connecting women to community-based services and supports such as income and employment programs. In most programs, advocacy services and support are offered as long as is required to help the survivor stabilize in her new home, sometimes for a year or more. Even when housing-focused services have officially ended, many rapid re-housing providers continue to provide follow-up contact on an as-requested basis to promote ongoing housing retention.

Domestic violence survivors may have complex services needs that cannot be met by any single organization. For example, domestic violence programs can often address violence-related issues, such as civil or criminal court proceedings, protection orders, peer support groups, children's services, and advocacy with child welfare authorities. They may have added re-housing services. But they may not have the capacity in-house to also meet education, training, employment, early childhood education, health care, substance abuse treatment, or mental health treatment. To ensure that survivors have access to such services, they rely upon on partnerships and collaboration with other service providers.

Domestic violence programs are traditionally committed to offering voluntary and survivor-driven services, an approach that is based on the values of the domestic violence movement to respect survivors' expertise in their own lives and to be guided by their voices. Home Free, a domestic violence service agency run by Volunteers of America in Portland, OR, provides an array of services to households in its Housing First program, including support groups, children's services, accompaniment to hearings and appointments, advocacy with law enforcement and child welfare, and employment access services. Home Free's approach is to offer services selected by each survivor based on her very individualized plan, rather than to require a particular set of services for each participant enrolled in the program. This approach is based on the belief that given choices and opportunities, participants will work to ensure their own safety and success. Home Free has found that if services are meaningful to participants' goals, they will actively engage in services. It also employs "mobile advocacy" - which may include home visits, accompaniment, and meeting at the survivor's workplace so that the survivor does not have to take time off work. By bringing advocacy services to her, the agency reduces barriers to supportive services and increases the program's flexibility and responsiveness.

Some of the services provided by domestic violence programs providing homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing assistance have required the development of new skill sets as well as the re-allocation of resources within the agency budget. These programs have educated themselves in areas that include landlord-tenant law, eligibility for and use of housing and homeless programs, legal protections around housing, and anti-poverty resources. Funds must be budgeted for rental assistance, transportation, and other economic needs. Program must also look at policies and practices, such as safety protocols for home visits and mechanisms for supporting and supervising mobile staff.

Income and Employment Assistance

Helping survivors quickly access income is crucial, especially when rental subsidies are limited. This is of particular importance to domestic violence providers because a woman may be highly vulnerable to return to an abusive relationship when she cannot find a viable path to maintain housing on her own.

Providers may offer assistance accessing public benefits such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits, subsidized child care, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. Women may need assistance and advocacy to access child support and to apply for permanent housing subsidies.

Because of the high cost of housing in most communities, providers using rapid re-housing models prioritize employment. Some programs allocate staff time to build relationships with potential employers and provide job search assistance. Other providers develop partnerships with public or nonprofit organizations that have expertise in job and career development for low-income individuals and families.

Redevelopment Opportunities for Women in St. Louis, Missouri has a three-phase rapid re-housing program, Safety & Security through Housing First, which focuses first on helping women find housing. Once women are re-housed, the program works intensively to help them increase their employment income. It is during this second phase that barriers to employment, such as criminal records, may become evident, and the program works actively with women to help them overcome those challenges and to take advantage of available work supports and opportunities. The third phase is less intensive and focuses on resolving issues such as credit problems and building assets.

The urgency to increase women's income through employment, education, or public benefits, must be balanced with helping women physically and emotionally heal from the abuse they have suffered. The costs and benefits of an intense focus on income must therefore be weighed carefully against the need to recover from trauma for each individual woman. Providers should work with each individual survivor to assess the costs and benefits of this trade-off when determining whether rapid re-housing is the right approach to meet her personal goals.

Conclusion

Every day, families impacted by domestic violence seek support from local agencies to find a safe place to stay, recovery services, and help re-establishing independent lives in a community of their choosing.

Increasingly domestic violence providers have included two new strategies in their toolbox to serve survivors: homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing. These strategies enable them to assist larger numbers of survivors, preserve emergency shelter and services for those with immediate needs, and pursue client-centered approaches to improving survivors' lives. At the national and local levels, domestic violence providers are joining the call to expand affordable housing options for low income families and are advocating for policy changes that better protect survivors' access to housing and choices in meeting their housing needs.